

Using the oral history discipline in military research

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The methodological discipline of using oral testimonies instead of or as a supplement to archives does in many ways stem from military history. Literature about World War II and the Vietnam War is traditionally referred to as some of the first recognized attempts of writing military history with the use of *oral history*. However, even ancient military historians benefitted from using this discipline. We know today that Herodotus and Thucydides used oral testimonies to write their descriptions of the Persian Wars and the Peloponnesian War respectively. Furthermore, historians of newer conflicts, such as the American Civil War, have adopted the discipline to extract new knowledge about the nature of these conflicts. However, what role does the discipline have in contemporary military historical research?

Research in contemporary military history often meets obstacles when it comes to getting access to official military archives. Furthermore, much of the military archives' material is classified which results in prolonged processing time by the relevant authorities before the knowledge can be put into use by the researcher. This paper argues that the methodological discipline of *oral history* is ideally to adapt when researching the newest conflicts. Oral testimonies provide military historians with unique knowledge that might not be found in the written records. Thus, the discipline is an invaluable component in describing events from contemporary battlefields. By devoting more attention to the stories and statements from soldiers, aid workers etc., military historians can provide more detailed descriptions of what actually happens on the ground during modern conflicts – details that often does not appear in official written records.

This paper starts by discussing the concept of oral history. It does so by providing a definition and chronological overview of the concept. The overview will focus on the discipline's entry and early use in military history. It will be shown that, contrary to popular belief, the discipline can be traced back to the very earliest descriptions of war and conflict. It will be argued that the motivation behind using oral history was basically the same for the classical Greek and Roman writing about ancient warfare as it is to day: to uncover and understand the chaos surrounding battles and conflict environments. The first section will use the U.S. Army's use of the discipline as an example of the development of the discipline. As will be shown, the army's use of military history gained a significant momentum during and after the Second World War.

The second section of the paper will focus on my own and other scholars' use of *oral history*. It does so by commenting on some recent publications about the international community's military involvement in peace operations in Croatia and Bosnia during the 1990's. It will be discussed how these authors have successfully adapted the discipline to supplement the traditional archival research.

The paper's last section will discuss the built-in pitfalls that obviously accompany the use of oral sources to describe contemporary conflicts. It will focus on both practical and not least ethical

issues surrounding the gathering of oral testimonies from soldiers. It will be argued that despite some methodological and practical issues inherent in this method, the benefits outnumber the shortcomings. The paper concludes with some comments on the discipline future and its relevance for future military history.